

1-1-1997

Preaching From the Old Testament

Paul Watson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>

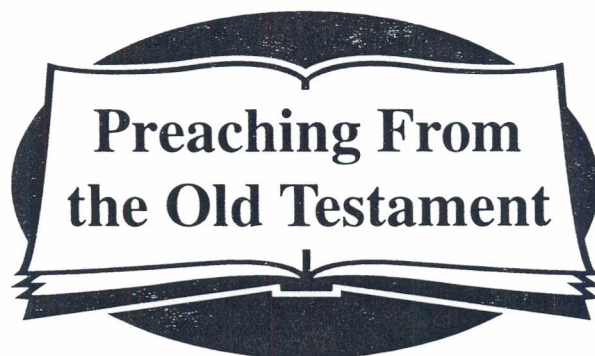


Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Watson, Paul (1997) "Preaching From the Old Testament," *Leaven*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 7.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol5/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized administrator of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact Kevin.Miller3@pepperdine.edu.



By Paul Watson

Preaching from the Old Testament is both a canonical necessity and a sheer delight. By “canonical necessity,” I mean at least two things: First, the Old Testament was the canon of Scripture for the New Testament church. From it the church preached; by it the church was led to understand what God had done in and through Jesus Christ. Anyone who wishes to be a “New Testament Christian,” reflecting the life and thought of the New Testament Church, must teach from and be guided by the Scriptures of that church. Second, to preach only from the New Testament would be to distort the message of the undivided canon. Some crucial theological themes, such as election and redemption, cannot be understood in their entirety apart from their development in the Old Testament. Other themes, such as creation and covenant, are presupposed in the New Testament but fully elaborated only in the Old. The Old Testament, with God’s person and work at its center, precludes an overemphasis on either Christology or ecclesiology, to which exclusive reliance on New Testament Scripture can lead.

By “sheer delight,” I mean simply that there are soul-filling, mind-engaging, and life-directing rewards that come from including Old Testament Scripture in our homiletic diet. Many of the narratives that meant so much to us as children take on new and even deeper meaning for us as adults—Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah, Moses at the burning bush, Jonah and the “whale,” to name only three. The prophets challenge us, as they challenged Israel, to connect our ethics—public and private—to our worship. The Psalms give voice to our greatest joys,

our sharpest pain, and our deepest regrets; they equip us to pray. Both the laws which regulated Israel’s life with God and one another, and the proverbial wisdom which gave practical, time-tested advice, help provide a framework for our own daily living. Even the technicolored, three-dimensional “apocalyptic” visions that we often have trouble comprehending remind us that the future belongs to God and that his future will be glorious and splendid indeed.

Canonical Necessity

“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. . . .” (2 Tim 3:16). As the commentaries will note, “Scripture” as used here by Paul means *at least*, if not exclusively, the Old Testament. For Timothy’s community, the Old Testament was to have a formative influence, shaping the church’s understanding and disciplining its living. The church will always need to be taught, trained, equipped—“measured,” as the word “canon” implies—and the Old Testament continues to meet that need.

From the Old Testament we first learn who God is: Creator, Judge, Promise Maker, Redeemer, Covenant Keeper, Father. From the beginning, in Genesis 1 and 2, we are awed by the claims made about God and his creation: that he summoned the universe into existence with regal commands, yet brought forth humankind with his own delicate touch and life-giving breath (1:3–25; 2:7, 21–22). That we, and we alone, were made in his image and charged with the maintenance of his creation (1:27–28, 2:15). That

Like it or not, we must also listen to the Old Testament's word about the human condition—that is, about sin.

gender distinction has two purposes: procreation (1:28) and intimacy (2:18). That it was the Creator's will for us to be both free and accountable (2:16–17). That the entire Creation is not value-neutral, much less evil, but “very good” (1:31). How would we know all of this, be shaped in our self-understanding and guided in our day-to-day living, apart from hearing the Old Testament word?

Like it or not, we must also listen to the Old Testament's word about the human condition—that is, about sin. To paraphrase Pogo, we have met Adam and Eve in the Garden (Gen 3), and they are us, as are their descendants: the angry Cain, the violent Lamech, the self-indulgent generation of Noah, the self-important tower builders at Babel. We are confronted with the abuse to our “neighbors” that results from our sin, whether that abuse is intended (Mic 2:6–9) or not (Josh 7:1). We see how quickly righteous allegiance (Exod 24:3) can yield to dishonorable denial (Exod 32:1–6). We even learn the vocabulary of penitence and remorse (Ps 51:3–4).

We would be overwhelmed by this painfully accurate depiction of the human condition were it not for the even greater message of God's electing, redeeming love, as told to us in the Old Testament story of Abraham and his family (of which we are a part: Gal 3:27–29). That story begins with God and his free selection of Abraham to receive his special blessing and to convey that blessing to the whole human race (Gen 12:1–3). When we ask why God would do such a thing, we are told only of his love (Deut 7:7–8) and his mercy (Exod 34:6–7).¹ When we ask how anyone could possibly respond to such divine love, we are pointed to Abraham's example: “Abraham believed the LORD, and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6; cf. Gal 3:6–9). As the story unfolds, we hear how this promise-making God honors his promises, using his power covertly to preserve (Gen 50:20) and overtly to deliver (Exod 14:30–31) his people. Having made good on his word, God invites his people to enter into full covenant relationship with him (Exod 19:3–6), and he holds them accountable for their declaration of commitment (Deut 26:16–17; 28:58–29:1).² Even the disobedience of an entire generation in the

wilderness will not deter God from fulfilling his purpose: to settle his people in a Promised Land that is both “inheritance” (Deut 25:19) and “gift” (Exod 33:1).

The story continues. Life in that land for succeeding generations is as much challenge as blessing. The temptations are constant to attribute good fortune to sources other than Yahweh-God, and to increase individual fortunes disproportionately and unrighteously at the expense of neighbors (see Hos 2:2–8 and Isa 5:8–10, respectively). Ultimately, the God who has given them possession of the land dispossesses them (Jer 17:1–4). Yet he does not abandon his people (Ezek 11:14–25), pointing them instead to the days to come, when he will make a “new covenant” with them (Jer 31:31–33) and will provide a new King who will reign in true righteousness (Isa 9:2–7).

The Old Testament's presentation of the Gospel is not the complete story, God's final word; that comes only with the Son. But neither is the New Testament complete or self-sufficient apart from the record of God's relationship to man in the Old. From Abraham and Sarah to Joseph and Mary, from Ur of the Chaldeans to Bethlehem of Judah—there is an interconnectedness, a canonical unity, between Old Testament and New that the early church knew and depended upon, as must we.

Sheer Delight

“Thy testimonies are my delight, they are my counselors” (Ps 119:24). The proclamation of God's testimonies as contained in the Old Testament are indeed delightful in many ways. Psalm 119 underscores two of these ways, the first of which is intellectual. The cacophony of voices heard today, each claiming a distinct apprehension of “truth,” leads only to our disorientation and disability. How refreshing it is, therefore, to hear from Israel, whether in Torah-text or prophetic oracle or hymn or proverb, “*This* is how things really are, how we really are.” There is consistency across this wide expanse of texts and times that brings closure to our quest for answers to the most profound questions we can ask: Who is in charge here? Does this world ultimately make sense? What is my purpose here? How does my existence relate to your existence, and yours to mine? Is the future—my future—closed or open?

This is not to suggest that the Old Testament is some ready-reference work, with a pat answer for any question we may think to ask. Indeed, the opposite is true. The Old Testament reminds us that our comprehension, like all other aspects of our being, is limited (Isa 55:8–9, Prov 30:18–19,

Job 42:1–3). Yet even this is intellectually satisfying, for it assures us that such limitation of understanding does not represent our incapacity or failure, but is part of “the way things are.” Furthermore, we are promised even greater understanding, not by our rejection of such limits (Gen 3), but by our worshipful acceptance of Him who knows no such limits (Ps 73:16–17).

Psalm 119 also affirms that the revelation of God, as found in the Old Testament and declared in the preaching thereof, is ethically delightful: “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, a light unto my path” (Ps 119:105). There is a stability that comes from not just knowing, but doing God’s will. By ordering my life in accord with God’s desire for me, I enjoy both productivity and longevity (Ps 1:3). Nor is this ethical delight merely private or individualistic: the whole community of God will find mutual satisfaction from living lives that embrace his holiness (Deut 28:9–14).

One of the greatest gains that can come from preaching the Old Testament lies precisely at this point: to turn us away from Pharisaic commandment-keeping for the sake of self-justification and consequent reward; to turn us back to Torah-following for the sake of pleasing God. “And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as at this day” (Deut 6:24). Such Torah observance is not mechanistic. “To do justice and to love kindness” (Mic 6:8) fully engages our capacity to empathize, understand, and do. Nor is such Torah observance perfect: our doing will be partial at best, deceitful and self-serving at worst. Yet even here, the Old Testament assures us, we may find God’s final goodness to us—his forgiveness: “I acknowledged my sin to thee, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgression to the LORD’; then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin” (Ps 32:5).

A third delight of Old Testament preaching is its aesthetic appeal. As the proverb has it, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver” (Prov 25:11). There are many such words in the Old Testament in combinations both small and large, and sharing these words from the pulpit conveys their freshness and vitality to God’s people today. The metaphors of the Old Testament are vivid and unforgettable, especially those found in the prophets: God can be “like a bear robbed of her cubs” (Hos 13:8), but also like a gentle, care-giving father teaching his son to walk (Hos 11:3). For Israel to have forgotten God is as incomprehensible as for a bride to forget what she wore on her wedding day (Jer 2:32). Compared to the sovereign power

of God, the national enemies of Israel weigh as much as dust on a pair of scales (Isa 40:15). The river of God, flowing from his temple throne, is so vivifying that it will desalinate the Dead Sea (Ezek 47:1–12). The most vivid meta-

There is an interconnectedness, a canonical unity, between Old Testament and New that the early church knew and depended upon, as must we.

phors of all, of course, are found in the apocalyptic material—the “Ancient of Days” (Dan 7:9–10), the heavenly cavalry patrolling the earth (Zech 1:7–17), etc.—and seem quite at home in our age of computer graphics and special effects.

Equally powerful are the longer rhetorical units, the prophetic oracles, the hymns and laments of the Psalms, and especially the narratives in the Torah and the Former Prophets. The very structure of each unit draws us into its power whether we are fully conscious of that structure or not. Take, for example, the ponderous “lamentation” of Amos 5:1–2, which is in fact the sound of a funeral procession mourning the death not of a single individual but of all Israel. Or consider the explicit answers given to implicit questions about our praise of God in Psalm 150: Where (v 1)? Why (v 2)? How (vv 3–5)? Who (v 6)?

As for the narratives, think of the taut, compact account of Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22:1–19). Not a word is spent on Abraham’s psychology—how he felt about God’s command; all is focused on his actions. Note the threefold “Here am I” which Abraham speaks and which moves the narrative from Abraham’s initial response to God (v 1) to Abraham’s poignant reply to his son (vv 7–8) to God’s own response to Abraham’s faithfulness (vv 11–12). By contrast, consider the much longer, slowly unfolding story of Joseph (Gen 37–50) with its many scenes and characters, which moves from familial disintegration to familial reunion, from famine to sufficiency, from death to life, from evil to good. Different still is the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11), an all-too-human drama in which David, despite his dereliction of duty, his lust, his disloyalty, and his conspiracies, seems to win out, until we hear the final word of the drama: “But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD.”

A fourth delight of Old Testament preaching comes from its appeal to our spirits, both affirming and responding to the full range of our feelings and emotions. For example, the injustice of unmerited suffering disturbs us intellectually, and even more, emotionally. The book of Job permits us to have such feelings; moreover, it helps us to express those feelings and to work through them. Or again, we are awed by the magnitude of creation and our place in it. In a way quite different from scientific or philosophical descriptions of creation, the hymnic language of Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 focuses this sense of awe and wonder. Then, when this same creation language is resounded in Isaiah 40–66 and projected into the future, we are encouraged, as was Israel in exile, to live in hope (cf. Isa 41:17–20, 43:14–21). We feel with Hannah her barrenness and, ultimately, her joy (1 Sam 1–2). David's elegy for Saul and Jonathan quickens feelings of appropriate respect for even an enemy, and of deep attachment to a constant friend. Even the legal texts may effect not just righteous behavior, but also compassion for the strangers and the marginalized who live among us, particularly when we hear that God himself feels their pain (Exod 22:21–24).

Of all the Old Testament materials, however, surely the Psalms are the most expressive of our fears and hopes, sorrows and joys. Take the inner turmoil that we feel—the pain, the sense of abandonment, the helplessness—in the midst of sickness, rejection, and want. Wondering if it is even proper for a Christian to feel such things, much less express them, how relieved we are to find the psalms of lament. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is how we feel but not what we can say until we find it first in the Old Testament (Ps 22:1), and then on Jesus' very own lips (Mark 15:34).

Remorse is even more difficult for us to name and deal with. Then we hear such words as, “My wounds grow foul and fester because of my foolishness” (Ps 38:5) and “Out of the depths I cry to thee, O LORD! LORD, hear my voice. . . . If thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, LORD, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared” (Ps 130:1, 3–4), and we are empowered to confess our sins and to accept God's forgiveness.

The Psalms likewise speak to our joy and encourage us to express it. In a world not given to true praise, this is no small blessing. Through the Psalms we, too, can praise God's eternal protection (Ps 90:1–2), his unique power (Ps

72:18–19), his special care of his own people (Ps 105:43–45), and his providing presence, even to the point of death itself (Ps 23:1–4). God's unyielding rule (Ps 2), his constant, faithful love (Ps 117), even his disciplining anger (Ps 30:5) are cause for rejoicing, which the Psalms help us to feel and to express.

Conclusion

To preach the Old Testament is an incumbency. We cannot “declare the whole counsel of God” without speaking from, and listening to, that counsel as found in Genesis and Job, Psalms and Jeremiah. To limit ourselves to hearing the New Testament is to create for ourselves a Scripture, a “canon,” that the early church never claimed. (Recall that the first notable heretic of the Christian faith, Marcion of Sinope in Pontus, did precisely that. Reasoning that “the Christian Gospel was wholly a Gospel of Love to the absolute exclusion of Law,” he completely rejected the Old Testament.)³ Nor is this Old Testament preaching a mere technical necessity. We are truly diminished in our understanding of God and his relationship to us, and in our capacity to respond to him, if we mute his witness from the Old Testament.

To preach the Old Testament is also a joy. Its words appeal to our total being. By its stories, songs, laws, proverbs, oracles, and visions we are enlightened in our understanding, moved in our hearts, and shaped in our wills. The Old Testament provides a divinely intended delight that we cannot find anywhere else.

PAUL WATSON is Preaching Minister for the Cole Mill Road Church of Christ in Durham, North Carolina. He earned his doctorate in Old Testament from Yale University and has published and spoken widely on the riches of Old Testament preaching.

Notes

¹For a comprehensive presentation of the Old Testament based on the steadfast love of God as declared in Exodus 34:6–7, see Tom Olbricht, *He Loves Forever: The Message of the Old Testament* (Austin, TX: Sweet Publishing, 1980).

²The pattern of divine-human interaction is set in the Old Testament and reinforced in the New: God acts, freely and mercifully, for those whom he chooses. He subsequently expects free but full allegiance in return. Exodus leads to Sinai, just as surely as Calvary leads to Pentecost. See further Michael Goldberg, *Jews and Christians: Getting our Stories Straight* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985).

³“Marcion,” *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 854.

Selected Bibliography

Achtemeier, Elizabeth. *The Old Testament and Proclamation of the Gospel*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973.

An early work from a master interpreter of the Old Testament having two major sections: "The Necessity of the Old Testament for Christian Faith" and "Preaching from the Old Testament," including four sermons.

Brueggemann, Walter. *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982.

An intriguing suggestion for using the canon of the Hebrew Bible—Torah, Prophets, and Writings—as a model for biblical teaching (and, by extension, preaching).

Childs, Brevard. *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.

A compact, thought-provoking exposition of the major theological themes of the Old Testament as they come to us in their "canonical context."

Gowan, Donald E. *Reclaiming the Old Testament for the Christian Pulpit*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980.

Still the best introduction to preaching from the Old Testament. Arranged according to literary types, with discussion and sample sermon(s) of each type.

Holladay, William L. *Long Ago God Spoke: How Christians May Hear the Old Testament Today*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.

A brief but perceptive treatment of many issues en-

countered by Christians when they read the Old Testament, such as the fear of God, the relationship of covenant and law, and the divinely supported battles fought by Israel.

Long, Thomas G. *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989.

An approach to correlating the form and style of the sermon with that of the passage being preached. Old Testament types include psalms, proverbs and narratives; also, Jesus' parables and the epistles from the New Testament.

von Rad, Gerhard. *Biblical Interpretations in Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977.

Homiletical exegesis and exposition of twenty Old Testament texts by one of this century's giants in the field of Old Testament studies.

Watson, Paul. *Expository Preaching from the Old Testament*. Inman Bible Lectures. Parkersburg, WV: Ohio Valley College, 1987.

A series of five lectures discussing and illustrating why and how to preach expository sermons from the Old Testament.

Wolff, Hans Walter. *Old Testament and Christian Preaching*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.

A series of ten sermons from Old Testament texts delivered by the professor emeritus of the University of Heidelberg.